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**Opening Extract from...**

# Tyrant:
# Funeral Games

Written by Christian Cameron

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# TYRANT

## FUNERAL GAMES

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Maps drawn by Steven Sandford

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316 BC

The kurgan of Kineas rose above the delta of the Tanais River like one of the pyramids of distant Aegypt rendered in turf. At the top, a plinth of Parian marble winked white in the sun.

At the foot of the kurgan, where the spring-brown Tanais washed against the muddy beach, stood Srayanka, who had been Kineas's wife. Behind her waited a thirty-oared open boat, the stern firmly set in the mud, awaiting her pleasure while she hugged her children again – Melitta, who at twelve was already the image of her mother, and Satyrus, who was her twin and yet showed his father more, in his hips and shoulders and around his mouth. A mouth that was quivering with suppressed tears. Satyrus hugged his mother again and then Melitta took his hand and they stood on the beach with Philokles, their tutor.

'Mind you let them away from their scrolls and dead poets,' Srayanka said. 'Take them riding. Fishing. Too much writing kills the spirit.'

'Reading trains the mind as athletics trains the body,' Philokles intoned automatically. He slurred the word 'athletics'.

'I should only be gone five days. One ugly task, and we're off to the sea of grass for the summer. What have I forgotten?' Srayanka looked at Satyrus, who remembered things.

'You've told us *everything*,' Melitta said.

'The new athletics coach from Corinth should arrive any day,' Srayanka said. 'See that he is well received.'

'I know,' Philokles said. He was no more drunk than usual, and resented her repeated instructions with the ease of ancient habit.

'We all know,' Melitta said.

Satyrus would have liked to speak, but it took all his effort not to cry. He hated being separated from his mother. But he gathered his wits, took a deep breath and said, 'I want to go in the boat.'

Srayanka smiled at him, because Satyrus loved boats and the sea the way his sister loved horses and the sea of grass. 'Soon, my dear. Soon you can command my boat.' She looked out over the water. 'But not this trip.'

Satyrus trembled with the effort of suppressing his reaction. But he smiled at her, and she smiled back, pleased that her son was learning to command himself.

And then, despite her misgivings, Srayanka walked down the beach and up the boarding plank into the boat.

They took two days to sail to the gap in the long sandbanks that defined the Bay of Salmon, and another day to make their way through the passages between the temporary islands to the Euxine. Once they were clear of the last treacherous mudbank, they coasted along the shore, camping in the open for the night and then rowing slowly along the beach before Heron's city of Pantecapaeum, looking for the rendezvous.

It was one of those days people remember when they remember being happy – the sky as deep and blue as it could be, the spring sun lighting the green grass as it rolled away to the horizon, the sea a perfect azure reflecting the bowl of heaven, and the crisp golden beach neatly contrasting the black mud of the fields to the south and west. In autumn, they would be full of grain – the grain that made the Euxine rich.

Srayanka sat in the stern of the open boat with a handful of her best warriors and Ataelus, a Sakje tribesman from the east who had been her husband's scout. He was more than a scout now – his clan numbered in excess of six hundred riders.

A mixture of Greeks and local Maeotae – farmers, like the Sindi further west – rowed the boat. Srayanka smiled to watch them row together, because the mixture of the three races represented her not-quite-a-kingdom on the Tanais River. Today, she was going to land near Pantecapaeum to seal her status with a treaty – a Greek concept, but well within her understanding – that would ensure the safety of her shipping and her farmers and her children.

It was all very different from the way of her childhood, she thought, as her face warmed in the sun. As a spear-maiden, she

had ridden the sea of grass. When angered, she had made war. When her enemies were stronger than she, she had ridden away into the grass and vanished. Kineas and his dream of a kingdom on the Euxine had changed all that. Now she had thousands of farmers to protect and hundreds of Greek colonists and traders. *Hostages*. She could no longer ride away.

Well up the beach, as far as a good horse would go in two hundred heartbeats, she could see the man with whom she had come to treat – Heron, the tyrant of Pantecapaeum. Like Ataelus, Heron had been one of her husband's men a dozen years ago. Not one of her favourites, but the bonds held. Heron intended to make himself the king of the Euxine, and much as that thought offended her, acknowledging him would cost her no horses, as the old Sakje saying went.

She chuckled.

Ataelus gave her one of his broad smiles. It was easy – and foolish – to take those smiles for a lack of ready wit. Ataelus was just one of those men who found much to smile at. 'For being happy?' Ataelus asked. Fifteen years of living around Greeks and his Greek had never improved.

'We're going to make Heron the ghan of the Inner Sea,' she said in Sakje. In that language, her contempt was obvious – that she, who openly wore the sword of Cyrus and might end her days as queen of all the Sakje on the sea of grass, should bend the knee to some Greek boy with a mere city at his beck and call.

'For calling him Eumeles,' Ataelus said with a shrug – in Greek. 'Eumeles, not Heron.'

Srayanka watched the beach grow nearer and shook her head. 'I can't bring myself to like him,' she said.

Ataelus shrugged, the most Greek thing he did. He was wearing a heavy over-robe of Qin silk worked in gold. Under it he had a harness of bronze and horn scales. Despite his small stature, he looked like what he was – a cheerful warlord. 'Want to change your mind?' he asked, finally speaking in Sakje.

She shook her head. She could see Heron – Eumeles – standing a little in front of his guard, two dozen mercenaries. He was showy, dressed in purple and gold, with red sandals and a fancy

sword. Another man stood just behind him – a stranger, but his position said he was almost as important as Heron. The second man was not remarkable in his dress, in his size, in any way. He had nondescript hair and was of middling height. But the fact that he stood so near Heron caused her to narrow her eyes.

'Who is he?' she asked in Sakje. No need to go into details with Ataelus.

Ataelus moved his chin the breadth of a finger, but the gesture said that he, too, had never seen the man before.

Srayanka smiled at her captain – nothing so grand as a navarch, as the Greeks called their boat commanders. 'Put us ashore here,' she said. 'We'll walk a little.'

Ataelus grinned at her caution.

The bow of the open boat hissed and grumbled as he passed over the waves in the shallow water and then made a firm *crunch* as they ran up the sand. The men in the bow jumped free of the boat and dragged the light hull up the beach an armspan, and then the rest of the rowers were out, and the keel was dragged free of the water. Only then did the Sakje – none of them remotely resembling a sailor – jump down on to the sand. Two of Srayanka's warriors touched the sand and then their brows.

Srayanka watched Heron, just a few dozen horse-lengths away. 'Relaunch the boat,' she said in Greek. 'Ready to sail in a moment.'

Ataelus raised an eyebrow.

'Humour an old woman,' Srayanka said. She checked her *gorytos*, the bow case that every warrior wore all the time, her fingers touching the bow and the arrows, the knife strapped to the back of the case, and the sword of Cyrus at her waist.

All the Sakje mimicked her. The warriors looked at her and at Ataelus.

'I'm a fool,' she said. 'Let's get this done.' *For my children*, she thought. She liked her life – she had no real need to be queen of all the Sakje, nor even to displace her former enemy Marthax. She wanted to enjoy the rest of her life. One bend of her knee, and all she had worked for was safe.

She did not want to bend her knee. *Oh, husband of my heart.*

*We defeated Iskander, and now I bend the knee to a fool.*

Walking in sand was messy and undignified, and she wished she'd overcome her fears and her contempt and landed the boat at Heron's feet. *Eumeles' feet*, she thought. The scarecrow. The useless boy. A nonentity who pretended to be her husband's heir.

And then she was there – a horse-length from the tall, thin man in the purple cloak. She bowed to him.

'She is beautiful,' the man behind Heron said. His accent was Athenian, and she thought of Kineas. He seemed startled by her.

'All yours,' Heron said. He turned his back and vanished through his guards.

Betrayal. She knew it in an instant.

She got her *akinakes* – the sword of Cyrus, as long as her arm and wickedly sharp – in her hand before the guards could cross the sand. *What a fool, to use that gesture to warn me of his betrayal*, she thought, and the cool jade of the sword of Cyrus steadied her. She grabbed the first heavy spear thrust at her and jerked it, and then reached over the man's big, round shield to sink the point into his neck.

A blow in her side, but the armour under her robe turned the point, and she spun, but they had already closed around her and they weren't taking chances. She went down almost to the ground and swung her short sword *up* under a shield and the man screamed as he went down and she was into his place – a blow against her back, and another, and pain so sharp. She felt her vision tunnel and the strength going from her legs, but the *other* man was there, and she fell at him. She had lost control of her muscles before her sword slashed across the bridge of his nose and his blood fountained across her back. She saw their feet – some bare and some heavily sandalled.

'Fucking *whore*!' the Athenian screamed.

She smiled, even though dark was coming down and she knew just what that meant.

The solid sound of an arrow going home in flesh – the complex sound of the head punching through the guard's white leather *thorax* – would have made her smile again, except

that she was too far down the dark path for that. *Ataelus,* she thought. *Alive, and hence shooting. Save my children, Ataelus.*

Then shouts. Feet pounding. The Athenian cursing, sounding like a man with a bad cold.

Cold – every part of her cold. *Lying awake in her wagon on the sea of grass, naked to invite Kineas to play, but cold – and then the warmth, the reward as he came into her bed, warm and the smell of man and horse and dirty bronze that he wore like perfume.*

'Don't blame me,' Heron said. 'I gave her to you. You fucked it up.'

'She cut off my *d-d-dose*!' the Athenian groaned.

'Nonsense. Most of it is still there. I've sent for my healer. Now, what do you want – her head?' Heron was impatient. She formulated her curse on him, and spat it out, syllable by syllable, like the last drops of honey dripping from a jar, as the darkness came down. And she could still hear.

'Fuck you.' The Athenian managed to sound as if he had a spine.

'Any more insults and I'll tell Lord Cassander you died in the fighting. Am I clear? Good. My healer will see to your nose and then I will attempt to rectify *your* mistake before it costs me more money and more time.' Heron sounded as he always did – superior.

'You mbissed the little Scyth and dhow his boat's got away,' the Athenian said. The shock of his wound was wearing off. 'You were the fool who gave us away. Burder mbe and Cassander will come for *you*!'

'If you are an example of Cassander's might, I have just backed the wrong horse,' Heron said. 'Give my regards to the Lady Olympias. Remember – I am to be king of the Euxine. This was the price. Am I clear?' A pause. 'She was supposed to bring the brats. Where the fuck are they? I need them dead.'

'Fuck you,' the Athenian spat.

Srayanka was losing interest. The cold was going – she could feel his warm feet against hers, and she could smell the scent of old bronze and oil and horse – and a little male sweat.

As always, Kineas's touch relaxed her, and she flowed away.